

# THE ROLE OF CELIBACY IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

## An Interview with SWAMI CHIDANANDA

A DIVINE LIFE SOCIETY PUBLICATION

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AN INTERVIEW WITH

## SWAMI CHIDANANDA




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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

**(To the First Edition)**

In October, 1997, His Holiness Sri Swami Chidananda—who in 1963 succeeded His Holiness Sri Swami Sivananda Maharaj as president of the Divine Life Society—was interviewed by a leading American spiritual magazine on the question of the role of celibacy in the spiritual life.

This very powerful booklet is a presentation of the questions asked and the answers given. It provides the sincere spiritual seeker with rare insights, not only into the role of celibacy in the spiritual life, but into the goal of life itself, enlightenment.

The publishers are happy to release this valuable booklet on July 3, 1998, the auspicious 50th anniversary of the Yoga-Vedanta Forest Academy, which is an important and integral part of the Divine Life Society headquarters, Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India.

**—THE DIVINE LIFE SOCIETY**

# INTRODUCTION

In considering the role of celibacy in the spiritual life, it is important to remember that, in the context of Hindu society, the subject of *brahmacharya* or celibacy or self-restraint does not necessarily have any connection at all with the spiritual life, or *sadhana* (spiritual practices), or with Self-realisation as such. It is not normally discussed or recommended *only* with a view to promote spiritual life. The situation is totally different because of a certain uniqueness that has come to be part and parcel of the life of a Hindu in Indian-Hindu society.

That uniqueness is that our ancients have drawn up a certain social structure and also a pattern of social life for the individual. In ancient India, a person's life was reckoned as 100 years, divided into four stages. The first stage was the student stage, or *brahmacharya* stage, where the young people were expected to study hard, build a good physique, cultivate a noble character and in all ways prepare themselves for their adult lives. During this first stage they were expected to observe strict celibacy.

The second stage was the householder stage, where the exercise of the sexual faculty was taken for granted and recognised as a legitimate part of

human life. It was regarded as a fundamental, sacred duty of a family to create and offer progeny to form the next generation—for the perpetuation of society and also of the species. So here there was no question of celibacy in the strict sense of the term implying total abstinence. On the other hand, the exercise of sex was an indispensable duty for the householder. Of course, its exercise was not meant to be unbridled and unrestrained; otherwise it would be degrading. But it was given the full sanction of society and was considered to be something sacred and quite accepted.

The third stage of life was the retired stage, when the couple turned over to their sons the burdens of earning a living and themselves turned their minds to higher things. Here again *brahmacharya* was expected. The lawgivers said: "Do you want to go on being just a physical creature, bound down to physical consciousness, all your life? Now, raise your consciousness above its present total identification with the body and aspire to go higher!" So they said, restraint is necessary. But peculiarly enough this restraint was not an ordinary restraint; it was a sort of a challenge. It became part of their *sadhana*.

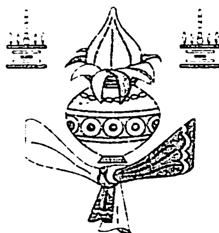
Then during the fourth stage, one's entire life was to be devoted to God and God alone. One became a *sannyasin*, or monk, and then, of course, celibacy was automatically total. Therefore, the concept of *brahmacharya* was part and parcel of

the Indian-Hindu social tradition. In its narrowest, restricted sense, *brahmacharya* meant complete celibacy, but in its broader sense, as it could be applied to the life of a householder, it meant moderation and self-restraint, not abusing the sex function, and strict fidelity to one's partner.

Man is a mixture of three ingredients: first, an animal with all the physical propensities and sense urges that one shares in common with animals; second, the rational, logical human level; and third, the dormant Divinity, the sleeping God within. The whole of the spiritual life is a gradual elimination, eradication, of the animal within, and the refinement or purification and education of the entire human nature so that it stops its movement in all other directions and starts taking on an ascending vertical direction. Once the human nature is given an upward turn, one simultaneously starts awakening the sleeping Divinity with the help of all one's spiritual practices.

If one knows that the spiritual process, the spiritual life, is the elimination of the animal, the refining and directing upwards of the human, and the awakening and unfoldment of the Divine, then all spiritual practices, including the role that *brahmacharya* plays, fall into their right place.

—**SWAMI CHIDANANDA**



# THE ROLE OF CELIBACY IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

### An Interview with

## SWAMI CHIDANANDA

**Question:** *Celibacy or brahmacharya has always been given a prominent place in the spiritual life, and we know that both Swami Sivananda and yourself have subscribed to its importance. Why is celibacy important and what is its role in the spiritual life?*

**Swamiji:** One of the reasons for its importance is that we have received as part and parcel of our heritage from our spiritual past the concept and view of celibacy being a basic requirement, a prerequisite, of spiritual life. And this concept and view has continued to have a certain recognition over many, many centuries during which time Indian society has changed, and many other old concepts have been discarded.

The normal Hindu has always been progressive. He has never hesitated to change if

he felt that the change would enhance his knowledge and take him in a better direction. And in coming into contact with views and knowledge from other societies, there has been an ongoing reappraisal of our ancient concepts and views. In spite of this we find that the concept of *brahmacharya* and its having an important role to play in the spiritual life has continued. It has stood the test of time; it has become time-honoured.

Had it not been something of enduring value, it would also have changed. But it has not. As it used to be regarded thousands of years ago, so is it regarded even today amongst spiritual teachers, *gurus* and *yogis*—with the same attitude of its being a necessary and important thing.

So, even though Swami Sivananda was very broadminded and up to date in his outlook, a modern sage—a prophet of the new age, as they say—he never hesitated to stick to tradition if he found that it has something of permanent value. He was most flexible, and he also could be inflexible. And that is his disciple also, Swami Chidananda, for the same reason.

Another reason I have always been an advocate of celibacy is that the towering spiritual personalities who have been a moulding influence in my life ever since I can remember—personalities like Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo

Ghosh—were all people who swore by celibacy. They were people who said that it is most important, indispensable. So naturally, when these people who were the source of my inspiration in the spiritual life were so forthright and absolutely clear—they didn't seem to have any doubt about it—I said, well, this is it! So that decided the matter for me in my approach to the life spiritual.

*Brahmacharya* or celibacy is a rational process of preserving and conserving precious energy so that it can be utilised in other very essential and indispensable functions. And if it is preserved like this, it can be converted, just as tangible, gross water is converted into subtle steam. Then it can do wonders. A river may not have much power in it by itself. You may be easily able to row or swim across it. But, if it is dammed up and its waters conserved, then it has the power, when properly channelled, to turn huge turbines and produce electricity. The hot sun, even in summer, does not normally cause a fire, but if you concentrate its rays through a lens, those rays will immediately burn whatever they are focused on. That it what celibacy actually is.

Now, the interesting question is: What is the origin, the source, of this energy? After years and years of theory and discovery, modern physicists have arrived at the conclusion that what exists in nature is not palpable or solid matter as such. It is energy, energy that fills the entire cosmos, all

space. Everything that exists is filled with unutterable energy, energy which takes so many forms. Everything that you see here, every force derives from that ultimate source of cosmic energy.

And our ancients have said that it is this cosmic energy that holds the heavenly bodies in their course. They are all kept moving by this mysterious, inexplicable, indescribable, unimaginable energy. And they regarded that energy as something divine, something that has neither a beginning nor an end. It is eternal and pervades everywhere. There is nowhere that it is not. And it is this energy, which not only keeps this universe going but countless such universes, that is present in living beings as the sex force.

So Hindus regarded this energy as sacred, something that is worthy of being worshipped, not frittered away. They said that this energy is none other than the manifestation of the Divine Mother, the cosmic energy. Therefore, it should be regarded with reverence.

This cosmic force manifests in our own system as *prana* (vital energy, life force). And *prana* is the precious reserve of the seeker. Any sense activity or sense experience consumes a lot of *prana*. And the activity that consumes the greatest amount of *prana* is the sex act. Gurudev has put it very strongly: "It shatters the entire nervous system." Because it creates great excitement, great

agitation, and such an intensity of feeling that as an aftermath it leaves the person exhausted and depleted.

The highest of all goals in human life—spiritual attainment—requires the maximum available pranic energy on all levels: mental, intellectual and emotional. It is through *prana* that one has to restrain one's senses. It is through *prana* that one has to still the restless activity of the mind. It is through *prana* that one has to centralise all the scattered rays of the mind and make it one-pointed in concentration. It is through *prana* that one has to direct the concentrated mind upon the object of meditation.

*Prana* is required for spiritual reflection and discrimination. The thinking must be sharp and the intellect penetrating. To understand the inner implications of a *guru's* instructions requires a special type of intelligence. You may be a very intellectual person, and you may immediately grasp the *language meaning* of something the *guru* is telling you, but if the *guru* is speaking of a abstruse subject not within the normal range of your ordinary human experience, you require a special subtle type of understanding. And that understanding develops through *brahmacharya*.

So as I said, all these various practices require the use of *prana*, and celibacy insures that an abundance of *pranic* reserve is available to the

seeker. So viewed from this angle, it is a rational and very positive process.

Many orthodox Hindus have said that you can worship God, want to have union with Him, to attain His vision, but still marry and lead a normal life. But our ancients also knew that that is not an easy path, because there are so many distractions, so many pressures, so many tensions, so many demands made upon the person in family life, that to give yourself wholly and totally to God—well, anything may be possible, but not this.

You cannot serve God and Mammon. Mammon sums up the worldly life, earthly life. Because, if you marry, you want Mammon. Without Mammon you cannot look after your household, keep the home fires burning, the pot boiling, and do everything that is necessary. Only the married person knows all that he has to do. Therefore, they said that renunciation of the earthly life is necessary to go whole hog into the spiritual quest; and the entire energy potential is also necessary if you really and truly mean to make the supreme effort to throw yourself entirely into the spiritual pursuit and its necessary disciplines.

Gurudev Swami Sivananda himself built his intense penance and austerity in yoga practice upon the basis of *brahmacharya*. So what he spoke about was a leaf from his own book of life. He had had a brief episode of a householder's life

way back when he was in Malaysia as a doctor, and perhaps that also must have given him, being a doctor, an idea of how much expending of energy it constitutes. So all the more his comparative experience confirmed him in the belief of the importance of *brahmacharya* for the *yogi* and the spiritual person.

This is the rationale behind celibacy. If you conserve this vital energy and divert it to the spiritual process of contemplation, philosophical study and reflection, and meditation, it becomes successful, because you have concentrated your force and you are able to direct the concentrated force by focusing it upon your spiritual practices. If it is preserved, concentrated and diverted into a specific channel, it works wonders.

There is another reason why *brahmacharya* is important. I am not now talking about exceptional persons who have a sudden illumination and then they are once and for all lifted from the gross physical plane of body consciousness into another, never to return back. In one moment of illumination, Ramana Maharshi became established in "I am neither mind nor body, Immortal Self am I. I have neither time nor space, I was never born." In one split second—one moment he was just an ordinary student and then suddenly he knows that he is what the Bhagavad Gita describes as "Fire cannot burn you; water cannot wet you; weapons cannot injure you; wind cannot

dry you. You are unborn, permanent, and eternal, beyond time. Death is nothing to you"—he became established once and for all in that experience, and he never budged from that state. All his life, no matter what was going on around him, it did not touch him. It did not affect him. I am not talking about such people.

Vedanta long ago probed into this subject of the human situation, and the sages saw clearly that 999 persons out of every 1,000 or 9,999 out of every 10,000 were completely caught up in a state of "I am this body." They knew of their identity only as a physical entity, a being with hands and feet and ears and eyes, eating, drinking, sleeping, talking, and doing things. So they are totally body-bound. Their consciousness is held upon the level of the physical body.

This is the situation. But the goal of the spiritual seeker is Cosmic Consciousness, which is their inner reality beyond time, space, name and form. So, when you juxtapose their present state of consciousness and the experience they wish to attain, you can just imagine how impossible this would be if they go on perpetuating this total identification with the physical body and all its processes.

Among all these bodily processes, most have become mechanical. Most people are not intensely aware of eating, drinking, sleeping, and voiding. All

these things have become automatic. But the one process that most of them purposefully engage in, with great desire for it—wanting it, thinking about it, planning for it and going after it—is sex enjoyment, which means that this is a process that concentrates their entire consciousness, entire mind, entire attention upon the physical, their physical identity. From one angle the sex act is the acme of physicality or animality. It is a process that perforce directs your entire attention upon the physical, and even more, the full focusing of your desire and intention upon that part of your physical nature that you share in common with the entire animal kingdom. Is this going to be in any way helpful for attaining Cosmic Consciousness?

So here is a human being, the crown and glory of God's creation, high above all the rest of the living species, going down to the gross, physical, material animal level and giving oneself totally to it—seeking it, wanting it, going after it, doing everything one can in order to obtain it, indulging in it, and wanting to have it always available. That means that one is voluntarily binding oneself down to a level of physical consciousness.

If you are a spiritual seeker, can you not see that you are working against yourself? You have to liberate your consciousness from the lesser levels and go on lifting it to progressively higher and higher levels of finer and more refined states. For if the whole of the spiritual process of illumination

and enlightenment is a process of rising into a higher state of consciousness, it automatically implies liberating yourself form a lower state of consciousness. If you want to move northward it means moving away from the south.

And one of the things that helps you to free yourself from being caught in this physical level is celibacy. Cosmic Consciousness, Absolute Consciousness, is a far cry if you don't recognise the necessity of liberating yourself from your total identification with the body.

**Question:** *Are there particular stages in the spiritual life when celibacy becomes especially important or even essential?*

**Swamiji:** Yes and no. From one point of view, celibacy forms the very foundation, and the foundation is not any later stage of a constructive process. It is the very first stage, the ABC stage. So we may say that it is not at *some* stage that it becomes important or indispensable, but that it is essential right form the very beginning.

**Question:** *If you wanted to call it a stage, then it means you'd call it the stage where you start taking the spiritual life seriously.*

**Swamiji:** Yes, seriously—when you say it and you *mean* what you say. If your aspiration is to be authentic and genuine, and if the aspiration is to take the form of an all-out commitment towards the spiritual experience and an all-out effort to move in

that direction, then you must keep moving only in that direction. You cannot run after two things. Because then it will be taking one step forward and one step backwards, and you will never really progress.

The spiritual life starts with your recognition that as long as you keep going headlong in the pursuit of sense satisfaction and pleasure, you are not going to move one step. So all will be academic and theoretical. Our aspiration, our wanting spiritual life will only be in theory—a fancy and a feeling. You have not started. So the beginning stage itself of the spiritual life is a turning away from sense experience and sense indulgence and starting to move in the opposite direction.

It is perhaps precisely for this reason that Maharshi Patanjali put *brahmacharya* right at the very commencement of his eight-stage Raja Yoga and not at any later stage. It is one of the five vows that constitute the first stage. If he had thought that it was only important or essential at a later stage, he would have brought it in at the third or fourth stage. But no, he did it at the very beginning.

Swami Sivananda used to say: "*Brahmacharya* is the basis of immortality." And in many places in the Upanishads it says: "Wisdom experience cannot come to one who has not his senses under restraint and who has not controlled the vagaries of his wandering mind."

So I believe that it is not at *some* stage, but it is the *all* of the life spiritual. Because spiritual life is a transcendence of your human nature, human consciousness. And if it is a transcendence, you have to leave behind all that constitutes your human nature, your physicality. You will have to commence with it and keep on with it. You view celibacy in a positive manner, not as something anti-nature. You do not at all feel that you are doing any violence to yourself.

Finally, from a purely scientific and technical point of view, one of the *yogas* where celibacy is absolutely essential and indispensable is *kundalini yoga*. There is no compromise with that. Right from the beginning it is absolutely essential and indispensable . Otherwise it is dangerous to go into *kundalini yoga* which is based upon *pranayama* and many *mudras*, *bandhas* and *asanas*.

That's the "no" part of the answer.

The "yes" part is to state that in the total context of spiritual life in India, there are certain stages and states where one can be highly spiritual and yet at the same time be leading a normal sex life. That is true especially in the *bhakti* path—people who are following the path of love of God, devotion, prayer and worship, chanting the Divine Name, singing His glories. This path does not make any distinction between a celibate *brahmachari*, a married householder, and a retired

couple living a spiritually oriented life after they have finished their duties as householders.

So the path of devotion seems to be a dimension of spiritual life in India where total celibacy in its sense of absolute abstinence is not insisted upon. It is not looked upon with disfavour, but it is not insisted upon either. But because the sexual act consumes a great amount of *pranic* energy, naturally self-restraint is also important. And promiscuous sex was never countenanced, never looked upon with favour. So a sort of celibacy in the form of self-control and fidelity in your sexual relationship with your recognised legal partner can also be regarded as *brahmacharya*. Here, the husband looks upon all other women as mothers. He has only one woman and that is his lawfully wedded wife. He is what is called an *eka-patni-vrata* husband, one who has taken the vow of a single wife. There is no question of having a mistress or of even thinking of another woman. And the wife bases her life on the vow of *pati-vrata*. In a total sense, she has only one partner in life. All other men are like her children; she has the feeling of motherhood in her heart towards all other men except her husband. So here the sex life does not in any way go contrary to spiritual life.

And this has been the case with ever so many devotees, lovers of God, and spiritual India lacks no example of them. Throughout India we have seen the phenomenon of large communities of

ecstatic devotees of God, many or most of whom have been married people, living a normal sex life, but nevertheless absorbed in divine love of God. So, this is the "yes" portion. In this stage sexuality seems not in any way forbidden or incompatible with spiritual life.

**Question:** *I presume that Vedantic enquiry, the more intellectual approach to the spiritual life, would also not be incompatible with normal married life.*

**Swamiji:** Yes, yes. But in the Vedantic type of life, gradually, unconsciously, without even intending it on purpose, in the course of time the person would graduate to that level of consciousness where sex would begin to seem superfluous. Because it contradicts the very basic thesis of Vedanta: "I am not this body. I am not the five elements. I am not the limiting adjuncts. I am something quite distinct and different." And for that different, distinct Thing, sex has no meaning. For, It is not within the realm of physical consciousness and physical functioning.

**Question:** *Celibacy is often seen in the modern West as an outmoded, old-fashioned practice. It is often viewed as repressive, life-denying—even antithetical to what spiritual practice is ultimately all about. Many spiritual authorities in the West are now teaching that to realise our full potential as human beings, we must*

*embrace, rather than in any way avoid or repress, our sexuality. These views stand in stark contrast to what the great traditions have always taught. What do you think about this?*

**Swamiji:** I don't agree with the general attitude that has just been expressed. They have failed to grasp the place of *brahmacharya* in the spiritual life.

It is not outmoded; it is not at all old-fashioned, and it is not repressive or life-denying. On the contrary, it is used as a plank for everlasting life, endless life. Their view of life seems to be a very, very limited and narrow view of life. This is not the only life there is. When you come to have a little glimpse or idea of what real life is, then you will just stand amazed. This present life as such is meaningless. It is a petty trifle, a nothing, if not understood in terms of its being a take-off runway for catapulting into that greater life.

This life is a means to that great, glorious, grand end and aim of human existence which is to enter into a life that is the life of God, that is one with God's life, the Kingdom of Heaven. That is the whole purpose of human existence. Human life has been given to us as a passageway to Divinity, as a passageway to everlasting life.

No person with a little religious knowledge and awareness or a spiritual view will ever deny the validity of *brahmacharya*. It is something scientific

and a scientific thing never gets outmoded or old-fashioned. *Brahmacharya* is neither avoiding sexuality nor repressing sexuality. It is giving the go-by to sexuality so that the potential and the power of the sexual process can now be used for something so wonderful that sex pales into insignificance in contrast.

So *brahmacharya* is neither repressing sexuality nor avoiding sexuality. It is just bypassing sexuality—making use of this sexual potential for something ten times, a hundred times greater. Therefore, the question of repression and suppression is a misnomer. It is due to a lack of proper understanding of what the real spiritual quest is. If it is understood, then these terms will not be used. We are not just human beings; we are more than human beings. Our human status is only a pale reflection of what we really are. The only reason our human status acquires some meaning and significance is because if it is properly utilised, it can raise us up and take us into that which is our own, bring us into the Kingdom—to which we have a birthright.

If you want to understand the practice of celibacy through an analogy that is within the thought forms of today, consider an athlete whose great ambition is to win a gold medal at the Olympics. He will willingly put himself into the hands of a trainer, and if the trainer says, "No more late night revelry, no more sex, no more junk food,

no more alcohol," the athlete readily agrees. He says: "I'll agree to this and more also if you want it." Why? Because he wants the gold medal. And no one raises an eyebrow, no one is outraged. Why? Because the gold medal justifies all these so-called "inhibitions." You cannot say that he's doing violence to or repressing himself, because he is not looking at it that way. He is willing to do anything that the trainer demands of him. It is not imposed upon him by other people. We understand why he is doing it and we accept it.

However, in one way the idea in the West that *brahmacharya* is suppression is not entirely off the mark. If one represses or suppresses some inherent natural force or faculty, it can bring about undesirable changes in the personality. If *brahmacharya* is forced upon an individual against the individual's inclination and will, abnormal conditions naturally may result, because the person is being compelled to do something that deep within himself or herself the person does not want to do—compelled by others, by social restraint or by taking up vows that he or she ought not to have taken before having well considered exactly what it implied.

But if an intelligent person, having deeply pondered the whole basis of life, says: "When I want to achieve something great, something mighty, I cannot afford to deplete the energies that I have. The more I conserve, the more I can divert

into that achievement and the greater the chance of succeeding." So thinking and having understood the rationale of it and fully appreciating the ultimate achievement it would lead to, if he or she voluntarily, willingly and with great enthusiasm undertakes celibacy, where comes the question of suppression?

On the contrary, what appears to be a sort of denial is actually giving full self-expression to a higher dimension of your being into which you have now placed yourself. So, far from denying self-expression, it is giving full expression to yourself because you are no longer identified with the lesser aspect of your total personality. You are identified with the higher aspect. It is a sort of a liberation and evolution to a higher level. It is something positive, creative, and not anything negative. It is not a denial but an actual expression of yourself in the form of a keen aspiration and a noble ambition.

When it constitutes such a process, then Freud and the others are off the mark. They have never visualised such a situation, such a possibility. But it is not only a possibility, it is a tradition of centuries, of millennia—someone being prepared to do anything, give anything, pay any price for the attainment of the Highest.

**Question:** *Tantra or the practice of "Sacred Sexuality," is becoming very popular in the West*

*today. Do you think these teachings offer an authentic spiritual path?*

**Swamiji:** No, I do not think that these teachings offer an authentic spiritual path. Why? Because of human frailty, human weakness. The human mind is so made that it always takes the path of least resistance. It always wants the easy way.

*Tantra* is an approach to God through all types of sense enjoyment. Everything is offered to God and so everything becomes sanctified; nothing is profane. One enjoys sense satisfaction and sees it also as part of God's bliss. There is a view, and it has something to it, that while in all human experiences duality persists—there is an "I am enjoying this object" feeling—that in the ultimate sexual experience between a truly loving male, intensely in love with the female and fully reciprocated by the female, there is no consciousness of one's separate individuality. There is a total fusion of the separatist consciousness in each one, and there is only the awareness of bliss experience. There is no experiencer. They say this is a possibility when it is done to its perfection. The two cease to be and there is only one, non-dual experience, Experience Absolute, Brahmic-consciousness. So they say that the human body is an instrument that, if

properly made use of, can bring about a rising above body consciousness.

For one in a million it may click.

The pursuit of pleasure is part of the Western view of life—not the denial of pleasure. And one teacher in ten may be an authentic teacher genuinely offering something suited to the Western temperament. But nine of them are very shrewd people. They know there is a market for this, and they are wise to it. The approach is: You can have your cake and eat it too.

Mind you, this was an authentic path that did once upon a time exist in India, especially in the Eastern part. Even now it exists. But it became grossly perverted. People became enmeshed in it. They said they were practising *tantra* but it was only wining, dining, and sex pleasure. It took them nowhere, but I suppose it took them where they wanted to go. So it was dubbed by enlightened people of that time as the "perverted path." Two paths then came into existence; the authentic path which was called the "right-hand path," and the perverted path which was only after enjoyment. That was called the "left-hand path."

There is an episode in the life of the great Sri Ramakrishna, the guru of Swami Vivekananda. He practised all the yogic paths as well as Christianity, Islam and others, and he discovered that they all led to the same ultimate God-experience. And

during one period of his spiritual life he practised *tantra* also. A woman *tantric* approached him and said, "I have been sent here by God to initiate you into the *tantric* way of attaining God." Day after day she expounded the *tantric* way. But when it came to the final stage, Sri Ramakrishna, who swore by *brahmacharya*, replied that through this [his] body it is impossible. She said, "Then I'll have the whole thing enacted before you." So she got a *tantric* male and a *tantric* female to enact the ultimate consummation of the practice before him. As he was observing it stage by stage she went on describing it to him: "Observe carefully. Now you see how they are in ecstasy; they are ecstatic. They are losing their own consciousness." And at that stage, suddenly Ramakrishna lost all consciousness. He went into deep *samadhi.* So he vicariously proved to himself that that ultimate sexual experience can lift one up into that stage beyond all duality.

And so the science as such exists, but there are very few authentic *gurus*, and it has to be strictly followed under the personal supervision of a true *guru*. I am likely to be accused of being uncharitable, but I believe that most purveyors of modern sacred sexuality are interested in making a profit out of it for themselves.

As I told you, the sex force is sacred; sex is sacred. It is one of the most sacred of all things. But sacred sexuality is a misnomer. Once you get

enmeshed in sexuality, the sacredness is given the bye-bye. That is due to man's weakness, frailty. Therefore, I am not going to be an advocate of it.

**Question:** *Considering the number of lapses and aberrations in those who have taken a lifelong vow of celibacy both in the West and East, do you feel that perhaps undertaking the practice should be restricted to individuals who have attained a certain degree of spiritual maturity first?*

**Swamiji:** I wouldn't fully subscribe to this view because, first and foremost, people who have attained to a certain degree of spiritual maturity would have reached that at least partially through *brahmacharya*. The very fact that they have reached a certain degree of spiritual maturity indicates that *brahmacharya*, at least in the broader sense of the term, must have been part of their make up or part of the way by which they ascended to that degree of maturity. And I have no hesitation in saying that the lapses and aberrations you refer to cannot lessen the validity of the concept and the tradition of *brahmacharya* in any way. they are solely due to the imperfection of the persons concerned.

On the other hand, before one takes a lifelong vow of celibacy one has to make sure one has a real vocation; there has to be an inner call to the life and to embrace celibacy. It cannot be a decision based on sentiment and emotional euphoria,

rather it is a judgement through a rational, logical appraisal of the life. I also insist that one should not take the vow of monasticism until one is old enough to understand one's own biology and has had some experience of what one has within oneself, what one has to deal with. One has to face this squarely.

I would also suggest that a person be allowed to take the vow of lifelong celibacy only after they have been kept under observation and tutelage for some time. For example, the Ramakrishna Mission keeps a person as a pre-probationer for one full year. Then he goes through a probationary period for a minimum of eight years. Only then is he eligible to request that he be a full monastic *swami*. So this type of taking in, sifting and observing would perhaps obviate many of these lapses and aberrations. You only allow a person to undertake that vow after a certain period in the spiritual life.

However, even when all the conditions I have mentioned are fulfilled, extreme caution must be exercised until a stage is reached where *brahmacharya* is one's normal and natural condition.

Brahman is the highest *brahmachari* because He is One without a second, and if you are established in Brahman, you are in that same state—where there is no second, where there is no other. There is a stage where one becomes totally

devoid or free from the sex idea. There is no sex or man or woman or this or that because one's view has radically changed. Quite apart from whatever is around—the world in which one is living—one is totally changed. One's consciousness is no longer kept upon that level where these things have any meaning or relevance. When consciousness is in another place, all things are seen, perceived, but they make no difference. You look at this, you look at that; you are seeing everything, but it doesn't bring about any change in the state of your inner consciousness, which always remains the same. That is the ultimate transcendence which is a possibility and which is an ideal, which ought to be striven for and which ought to be attained. That is what the *guru* wants for the disciple. That is what the saints want for the ordinary man. Because, before this there is still risk of a downfall. So our saints say that until the last breath always exercise caution.

Actually, the vast, vast majority of human beings are human animals only; they are totally rooted in body consciousness. So the *yogi* says that their consciousness only revolves in the lowest three centres, that is food, sex and lower elimination. If some higher awakening comes and they develop compassion for others, a spirit of service, wanting to make others happy, then the consciousness occasionally manifests itself in the fourth centre, the centre of feeling.

If the consciousness persists in the upward trend of spiritual evolution and ideal living, it can come to the *visuddha-chakra* where one can have many subjective experiences, visions, etc., but still the experiences come and go and the consciousness moves up and down, up and down.

If consciousness rises further to the *ajna-chakra*, one tends to be more and more stable, established, because it is the centre of the mind, the psyche. But it is only when consciousness comes to the *sahasrara* that there is no longer a chance of a downfall. One is above body consciousness. One is not aware of oneself as a body. One does not think or feel or conceive of oneself as a physical entity at all. There is no moving down. Consciousness is firmly established. But until then there is always a need to be vigilant.

**Question:** *What is the key to success in brahmacharya?*

**Swamiji:** It is how you look at it!

First of all it is how you understand it. *Brahmacharya* is the diversion to a higher purpose and utilisation of the basic, quintessential energy potential of the universe located in the individual being. It is the individualised or microcosmic aspect of the illimitable, infinite, primordial Cosmic Power that is the macrocosmic aspect or the dynamic aspect of the one non-dual Reality. As you know, the static aspect is Brahman which is the

transcendental, non-dual Reality. And the kinetic or the dynamic aspect is that same thing in manifestation or expression, in movement.

The individualised aspect of this Primordial Power, located in all beings, is this latent potential for unbroken continuity of life and existence. This potential is practically everywhere. Just because you may be in a position to describe it and define it or explain it in terms of modern physics or chemistry doesn't in any way alter the actual metaphysical or philosophical fact of its real nature. Physically you may explain it in terms of pressure etc., but that is only an explanation of something that is already a transforming, ongoing process of continuously being and becoming, being and becoming.

This creative potential, creative power, is present throughout the botanical and animal kingdoms. It is this alone that manifests as all the different forces in the individual human being—the power of acting, the power of thinking, the ability to see, hear, smell, taste, to digest, to breathe—everything. And it is this that is equally present in both sexes as the sex energy. Therefore, this being the key to life, one can imagine its importance, and one can also imagine its precious quality.

If one can understand it in this way—realise its real, sacred cosmic nature, as the microcosmic

aspect of the macrocosmic *sakti* or Cosmic Power—one takes a healthy attitude of reverence for it. It is not something to be just spat away like spittle. A person may spend away nickels and dimes, but if he has gold coins he will not so easily part with them. So reverence is a fruit of this understanding. Furthermore, the aspirant recognises and sees clearly: "There is something very important that I have to do. I have a great goal to achieve and I require all the energy at my disposal to put into my spiritual quest. I cannot afford to divert it into other channels in order to obtain a lesser achievement." As Swami Krishnanandaji used to say, "It is better to aim at a lion and miss it than to aim at a jackal and hit it."

So the first key to success in *brahmacharya* is to recognise and understand the sacred and precious nature of the energy potential one has. When one has this clear perception that it is meant to be conserved, preserved and directed towards the greatest of all attainments, then one has a *desire* to be *brahmachari*. It is seen as a very positive process.

A second key to success, and a way of looking at both *brahmacharya* and the sex function, is even more fundamental, and it is one of the two factors that to a large extent have been personally utilised by me. It is to clearly perceive that first and foremost what they call the male sexual organ is not a sexual organ at all. It is only a urinary

drainpipe. That is what it is, and that is its main function from the moment a child comes out of his mother's womb and sees the light of day, right up to the last breath, till one departs from this world.

Actually, if you look at it, sex is not in that part of our anatomy at all. Sex is not in the urinary organ; sex is in the mind of a person. So it is a question of your mental attitude. If you are convinced and train your mind to think of it in a sane and rational manner—it's only an eliminatory thing; its main purpose is not that which dominates the world and drives it crazy—then you're already free of it. It doesn't obsess you any longer because you don't think of it in the way in which most of our unfortunate human society has been made to think.

Part of the reason for the world's obsession with sex and why it has become such a big problem—premarital sex, adultery, promiscuous sex—is its exploitation by commercial interests and their advertising. To sell merchandise, they blow up the girl-meet-boy phenomenon—a girl's body is meant to be enjoyed, and therefore she has to cultivate a body that can attract as much as possible—as if sex is the only important thing in life. They completely distort its basic purpose. The sooner that this is recognised, the easier will become the possibility of *brahmacharya*. Because when you come to think of it, the main function of

the sex act is the important, indispensable process of procreation.

From a higher metaphysical sense the husband and wife are cooperating with the Creator for perpetuation of the species so that creation will continue. That is its main function, not the experience of enjoyment that accompanies it. That is a secondary offshoot of it. Then why was this function made so enjoyable? It had to be. The procreative function, the perpetuation of the species, was done through the sex act, and if it was not combined with a super experience of pleasure and enjoyment, no one would indulge in it, and its purpose would be nullified. So Mother Nature in all Her wisdom combined these two, namely, the sex act and pleasure.

But if the mind is diverted into higher things, automatically *brahmacharya* becomes easy. You can succeed in *brahmacharya* if the mind is totally taken up by something so wonderful, so big, it absorbs you and elevates you, and the mind is simply gripped by it. When you want an infinitely higher enjoyment, then you say: "My discarding this is not any discarding. My discarding the smaller enjoyments of the physical aspect of my being is not at all any renunciation to boast about." On the contrary, you are being shrewd and wise because you want to go after something infinitely more wonderful. It is like throwing away pieces of glass if someone says, "I'll replace them with

diamonds." That is another way of looking at the whole phenomenon of celibacy from the point of view of the spiritual life and the highest attainment of illumination and enlightenment.

The third key to success is also something that I myself have used right from the very beginning, and I think it is the ultimate answer. The real secret of success in *brahmacharya*, the real key, is what I'm just now going to state.

The moment you begin to think that I am Atman, unborn, nameless, formless, I have neither body nor mind, I am *satchidananda* (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute), Self-sufficient, I am of the very nature of Bliss-Absolute—if you thus totally shift your consciousness to your reality, to your essential, eternal, true identity, then, finished! *Brahmacharya* is no longer a problem. The problem of *brahmacharya* ceases to exist except only once in a while due to old impressions. If some factor outside of you happens to act as a stimulus, then an idea may come.

Mind you, it is not only what your mental-intellectual mechanism thinks about yourself, it is also your feeling about yourself. If both your thinking and feeling are elevated to such a height, elevated to that dimension—it's not only a question of height, it's a different dimension altogether—and you move into that dimension, this

lower dimension ceases to be of importance, ceases to have any impact upon you. It is there; it may function, but you are not at all affected by it in any way.

Once you start cultivating staying put in the consciousness of your own essential identity, then *brahmacharya* is no longer a problem. It is solved. So the ultimate key to success in *brahmacharya* is *atma bhava,* to become absolutely convinced that you are something totally beyond body, mind, senses, etc. The mind, due to its habitual wrong thinking, may periodically bring in a contrary idea that "I am so and so." Be indifferent to it. Dismiss it as nonsense. Refuse to entertain it. Don't pay any attention to it. Just be. Abide in your own Self. This is the master key more than anything else.

If you want to put it in devotional terminology, there is a nice little composition by Paramhansa Yogananda. It goes something like this: "I am the bubble, You are the sea. Let me cease to be the bubble, make me the sea." And so the devotee prays to God: "I am Your child, what You are, that I am. You are divine, so I am divine. You have no body, so I have no body. I am pure Spirit, all pervading, like You. Take me up into Your state of consciousness."

So the devotee puts it in a different way. But the ultimate key to success in *brahmacharya* is the Vedantic process of shifting your

consciousness—rejecting the body consciousness and becoming established in your true Self-awareness as something where there is neither male, nor female, nor body, nor sex, nor personality.





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